

Things to Know About Christianity

What We Call God

Christians have three names for God. Each name refers to one of the three persons of the **Holy Trinity**. The first is **God the Father**, which refers to the all-powerful creator. The second is **God the Son**, which is Jesus who was both God and man. He was one person in whom both the God and human natures were consistently present. The third Christian name for God is the **Holy Spirit**. This is the term Christians use when referring to the manifestations of God's power on earth as in the miracles at Jesus' Baptism and at Pentecost.

Holy Book

The Christian Bible is divided into two sections: the **Old Testament**, which is almost the same as the Jewish Tanach, and the **New Testament**. Testament means promise. Christianity, whose roots lie in the Jewish tradition, interprets Jesus' coming as the fulfillment of promises made in the Old Testament. The New Testament consists of the Gospels, which retell the life, death and resurrection of Jesus; letters and other writings of the early Christian evangelists; and the Book of Revelations, which is about the end of time. Some fundamentalist Christians believe in the inerrant word of the Bible. Most, however, believe it is inspired by God and meant to be interpreted with human reason. There are many different translations of the Bible. We recommend the **Revised Standard Version**.

Worship and Prayer

Christians generally go to worship services at church on Sundays. The services usually include readings from the Bible and a related sermon given by the priest or minister who leads the service. Each Sunday at services, Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans celebrate the sacrament of **Holy Communion**, also known as the Eucharist. This is a remembrance of the last meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples before his death. Like Jesus did, the priest or minister who leads the service blesses bread and wine and offers some to each person. Among later Protestant denominations, which stress the primacy of the Bible over doctrine and ritual, this remembrance is known as Communion, the Lord's Supper or the Sacrament at the Altar, and it is not celebrated every Sunday.

When Catholics and Anglicans pray they sometimes kneel with their eyes closed and hands folded. They often begin and end their prayers by making a sign of the cross on their bodies by touching their head, chest and both shoulders. This symbolizes the cross on which Jesus died. Neither kneeling nor making the sign of the cross are traditional practices in most Protestant denominations.

One very special prayer for Christians is known as the **Lord's Prayer**. According to the Bible, Jesus taught this prayer to his followers. It goes like this: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory now and forever.*

Like the Jews, Christians follow the Ten Commandments (also known as the Decalogue) given by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. They are as follows:

- I. I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me.
- II. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God.
- III. Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
- IV. Honor your father and your mother.
- V. You shall not murder.
- VI. You shall not commit adultery.
- VII. You shall not steal.
- VIII. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
- IX. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
- X. You shall not cover your neighbor's goods.

Importantly, Christians take great stock in Jesus' reply when asked which of the Commandments was the most important. His response was that all the law hangs upon one simple commandment: Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and mind, and soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Calendar

The Christian calendar divides into years Before Christ (B.C.), which designates the years before the start of the epoch of Christ, and Anno Domini, In the Year of the Lord (A.D.), which designates the years beginning on the date of the year of the birth of Jesus. These designations were used widely in the Western world, however many writers now use the secular notations B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) instead of B.C. and C.E. (Common Era) instead of A.D.

Rituals

The most holy Christian ceremonies are called **sacraments**. These include **Baptism** and **Eucharist** (Holy Communion). Most churches baptize infants at the baptismal font in the church. The priest pours holy water over the child's head and anoints the baby's head with oil. This is a sign of purification and inclusion in the living "Body of Jesus Christ." In some Protestant churches adults are baptized by immersion into water. In Jesus' time people were baptized in rivers, and, according to the New Testament, Jesus was baptized by a man named John the Baptist. During the baptism the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove and said, "This is my beloved Son."

Holy Communion is the blessing by a priest of bread and wine, symbolizing Jesus' body and blood. The ritual commemorates Jesus' last meal with his disciples where he shared bread and wine, saying "*This is my body and blood.*" In this way Jesus promised to be with his disciples until the end of time.

Another ritual is **confirmation**. Christian children prepare for this sacrament by studying their religion and often performing community service. The ceremony includes an anointing with oil and laying on of hands by a bishop, who is an important regional church leader.

A list of all Seven Sacraments, which are referred to as Ordinances in many Protestant churches, follows:

1. Baptism
2. Confirmation, also known as Chrismation among Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox and Eastern-rite Catholics.
3. Eucharist, also known as Holy Communion, Communion, the Lord's Supper, and Sacrament of the Altar
4. Marriage
5. Holy Orders, also known as Ordination (This process in which clergy or monks are authorized to perform religious ritual is regarded as a sacrament in the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Anglican churches, but other Protestant denominations do not consider ordination a sacrament.)
6. Anointing of the Sick, also known as Unction (This is recognized as a sacrament among Catholic, Eastern Rite and some Anglican churches)
7. Penance, also known as Confession and Reconciliation (In the Catholic Church, people confess their sins to a priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which is the only ordinary way in which a person can receive forgiveness for mortal sins committed after baptism. Protestant churches believe that no intermediary is necessary between the Christian and God in order to be absolved from sins.)

Holidays

The **Easter** season, which is in the spring, is the most important time in the Christian calendar. It is the time when people celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. The forty days before Easter are known as **Lent** or **Great Lent**, which commemorates the 40 days that Jesus spent praying and fasting in the desert before returning to Jerusalem where he was crucified. The first day of Lent is **Ash Wednesday**. On this day many Christians go to church and receive a cross of ash on their forehead. The ash is a reminder that people are no more than dust in comparison with God and that we depend upon God's grace for our salvation. Lent is a time of fasting and giving up luxuries in preparation for Easter. The day before Lent begins is known as **Shrove Tuesday** or **Mardi Gras**. In many places, people celebrate this day with carnivals and special meals that they will not enjoy during Lent.

The week before Easter is known as **Holy Week**. It begins with **Palm Sunday** which commemorates the day Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and was greeted by crowds waving palms. In many churches palms are distributed to worshipers on this day. **Holy Thursday** is a remembrance of the Last Supper, the Passover meal Jesus celebrated with his disciples the night before he died. **Good Friday** remembers Jesus' death on the cross. And **Easter**, the most important Christian holiday, celebrates Jesus' resurrection from his tomb three days after his death. On Easter Christians decorate eggs as a symbol of new life.

The Christian **Christmas** season celebrates the birth of Jesus. The four weeks before Christmas, which is December 25th, are known as **Advent**. This is a time of special prayer in preparation for Christmas. Children often have Advent calendars which mark the days until the big holiday. Advent wreaths have four candles, one for each of the four Sundays preceding Christmas. Many churches have Christmas pageants in which children dress up and act out the Christmas story. According to the Bible, Jesus' parents (Mary and Joseph) traveled to Bethlehem for a census but were unable to find a room there. So they slept in a stable where Jesus was born and laid in a manger. Many churches have crèches or nativity scenes which picture Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in the stable with animals and shepherds looking on.

Epiphany, which is January 6, ends the Christmas season. On this day Christians remember the visit of the three kings who brought the baby Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Their visit shows that Jesus came as a savior for the whole world, not just the Jews.

Christianity Around the World

There are close to 2 billion Christians in the world. About half of these belong to the Roman Catholic Church, whose leader is the pope. Catholics believe that the pope is a direct successor of Jesus' disciple Peter, whom they consider the first pope. They believe the pope is God's representative on earth and is infallible when speaking about church doctrine. The pope's headquarters is in Rome. The majority of Roman Catholics live in Europe and the Americas.

In 1054 the Eastern Church, also known as the Orthodox Church, split from the Roman Catholic Church. This time is known as the East-West Schism or Great Schism. Today there are about 215 million members of the Orthodox Church, most of whom reside in Eastern Europe and Russia.

The split from the Roman Catholic Church that became the Protestant Reformation in 1378 is known as the Western Schism (sometimes referred to as the Great Schism as well, but not to be confused with the earlier split from the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches). Protestant denominations that developed after that Schism include the Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and Quaker denominations.